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Revisiting Patel's Frontier Vision: Border Disputes, Cultural Integration and Insurgency in Arunachal Pradesh

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Abstract

The study examines the vision of Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel in integrating diverse regions like present-day Arunachal Pradesh (AP). The tribals were self-reliant with traditional socio- political systems, making integration complex. Despite this, Patel foresaw the strategic importance of the Himalayas, especially during China's growing influence in Tibet, in 1950. His vision led to the inclusion of Tawang in 1951, which is now a disputed region between India and China. Drawing upon historical records, the study aims to link the convergence of contemporary politics with culture, language, and violence. By placing Patel's letter to Jawaharlal Nehru as the base of the research, the study critically analyses the cause and impact of political instability as well as shortcomings of cultural integration in the frontiers. The study also aims to explore separatist insurgency, which is alleged to have links to Chinese influence. Furthermore, Patel, in his 'early warning letter' to Nehru in 1950, called for the development of military infrastructure along the Himalayan border and highlighted the distinctive Mongoloid culture of the region. Thus, at present, militarization, development, and cultural integration efforts continue, which are met by changes in Arunachal's tribal society. Hence, the research highlights how China's persistent claims, incursions, and support for insurgency in AP undermine Patel's vision of a unified India. Consequently, the research explores Patel's strategic vision and its contemporary relevance as external and internal pressure persists. The objective is to reassess Patel's vision of dialogue and diplomacy in understanding true unification of AP and to discuss a framework for navigating the China-insurgency nexus through Patel's philosophy.

Keywords

Patel, Frontier, Arunachal Pradesh, China, Cultural-Integration, Insurgency.

1. Introduction

The 24th state of India, Arunachal Pradesh, is inhabited by a diverse ethnic group, each with its own distinct culture, identity, and dialect. While modern democratic institutions have been established, many tribes continue to uphold their traditional political systems, especially in cultural matters. As diverse as the state is, history is also contested by many. Historian Hudson suitably describes that in the 18th and 19th centuries, the North-East Frontier Agency (NEFA), present-day Arunachal Pradesh, was neither a part of British India nor the Tibet Administration. Further states that the region

was independent with primitive tribes who were inaccessible to the civilized neighbors (Hudson, 1962). However, at present, the land, which used to be independent in the 18th century, has become a politically controversial region, as China claims the entire region to be a part of Southern Tibet. During British colonial rule, the policy of "leave them alone" was adopted towards the inhabitants of the NEFA, largely because the wild borders were difficult to reach; additionally, it was a heavy task to administer and unrewarding altogether (Elwin, 2009).

However, in the years following Independence, Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel envisioned a policy for NEFA that contrasted with the British policy of non-interference. He believed that the true unity of Bharat could only be achieved by integrating all regions, including the remote frontiers, into a single political unit of a democratic republic. Known as the 'Iron Man of India,' Patel was the first Deputy Prime Minister of the country and is credited with the strategic integration of 560 fragmented princely states in India post-independence. Patel's visionary contribution continues to shape modern Indian politics and is widely respected by different Indian political parties. How-ever, Patel's leadership in integrating the Northeastern region, particularly the present-day frontier of Arunachal Pradesh, remains comparatively underrepresented in mainstream political history. Patel's letter to the Prime Minister Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru on 7th November 1950, serves as an important document in understanding his approach towards the Himalayan frontier. Patel's writing shows his political vision for the Himalayan borders was strategically significant and inclusive. Patel opted for a realist approach and took a pragmatic stance reflecting India's national security concerns. Patel's letter to Nehru in November 1950 further demonstrated foresight in anticipating China's onslaught in Tibet and its implications for India in the following years. He analyzed that the weak infrastructure and poor communication networks in the region could welcome threats to India and argued to initiate military preparedness along the eastern frontier, and his views continue to resonate in current strategic discourse. In the formative years of India-China relations, India stood firm in its belief in pacifism, or peaceful cordial relations with China, but Patel foresaw China's strategic onslaught towards Tibet, which he termed 'perfidy' (Mohanty, 2020). Moreover, with the annexation of Tibet, it was no longer a buffer state, as China became the immediate neighbor to India.

In recent years, the territorial counterclaims over the Tawang region or the entire state of Arunachal Pradesh between India and China stem from the Chinese disagreement with the Simla Conference of 1914, where the McMahon Line was demarcated. In the conference, there were three representatives: Henry McMahon (British India), Chen Ivan (China) and Lonchen Shatra (Tibet). Despite disagreements due to respective national interests, the three representatives initialed the document. In the conference, Shatra, representing Tibet's interest, demanded the autonomy of Tibet, reorganization of Tibet's geo-graphical boundary and re-definition of Sino-Tibet borders (Pattnaik, Panda, & Panda, 2025). In doing so, Shatra also presented substantial evidence and materials supporting Tibet's claims, such as 'revenue records, list of houses, officials and headmen, charters, agreements and other materials relating to disputed districts' (Bose, 1997, p. 133). British India, on the other hand, had already anticipated that the tripartite agreement involving China and Tibet might not reach any concrete discussion. However, McMahon presented the idea of the zonal division of Tibet into two parts—outer and inner Tibet. China would have authority over Inner Tibet with minimal restrictions, specifically regarding the selection of chief officials at monasteries and ensuring that the administrative territory is not reduced to a Chinese province (Pattnaik, Panda, & Panda, 2025). Whereas Outer Tibet was given full autonomy (Singh, 1967). Following the disagreements and refusal of the frame-work put forward by Tibet and British India, Ivan refused to sign the tripartite agreement and walked out of the convention (Sinha, 1987). However, Tibet and British India signed the Simla convention making it a dual-party agreement. And the other objective of McMahon to demarcate the border between India and Tibet was also accepted by a bipartite agreement; as the watershed principle was followed, which recognized mountains and rivers as determinants to demarcate a dividing line, especially in inaccessible areas (Pattnaik, Panda, & Panda, 2025). Consequently, on the same day, following the convention, China repudiated the action of their representative, on the grounds that Ivan did not consult with the Chinese authorities and was forced to consent in initialing the document due to a threat by McMahon. The Chinese government also attributed the failure of the McMahon Line to the secret communication exchanged for their own interest between Shatra and McMahon prior to the conference, leaving out the Chinese counterpart (Basar, 2021). Hence, it is on this basis that the validity of the Simla Convention is questioned and disputed by China. Additionally, the McMahon Line was never delimited on the ground, therefore posing a challenge in identifying the locations and boundaries (Basar, 2021). Consequently, what appears to be on the map varies from the ground and vice versa. Hence, it is on this account that the region is disputed. Moreover, Chinese territorial claims over Arunachal Pradesh also stem from a historical, cultural, and economic context, arguing the region's affiliation with Tibet. Historical

developments such as the 6th Dalai Lama being born in Tawang and the construction of Tawang Monastery in 1861 under the order of the 5th Dalai Lama, among other historical claims (Bath, 2023).

One of Patel's significant contributions in Arunachal Pradesh, which has been unaddressed, is his decision through which Tawang became part of India. Today, Tawang stands as one of the most developed hill stations in India, and this western-most region of Arunachal Pradesh borders China and Bhutan, making it a geopolitically significant region and a point of international contention between India and China. Historically, Tawang was distant from the purview of Indian administration. Post Indian independence in 1947 and even until 1951, the gateway to Tibet from NEFA via Tawang was not a part of India. It was a region administered by Tibet and the Monpa community, who are local to Tawang and were also forced to pay hefty amounts of taxes to the Tibetan administration. Additionally, the Chinese onslaught in Tibet and the activities of the PLA were also recorded near the borders of NEFA. Upon this, the Border Defense Committee under the Governor of As-sam, Jairamdas Daulatram, ordered Major Bob Khating to lead an expedition with troops of Assam Rifles towards Tawang. And despite tough negotiations with the Tibetan administration, Major Bob was able to persuade the Monpa community from Tawang to join the Union of India. Upon arrival, the Major spoke about the Indian nation to the people of Tawang and was finally able to establish Indian administration in the eastern frontier. Major Bob's contribution was significant in inte-grating Tawang without any bloodshed; however, Patel also had a role behind the expedition. Along with Governor Jairamdas Daulatram, Patel had decided on the operation in 1950 and laid his trust in Major Bob Khating. As Patel passed away a few months before the expedition, it is believed that to merge Tawang with India was Patel's dying wish (Arpi, 2024). Hence, Patel's contribution in integrating Tawang along with Governor Das and Major Bob Kathing has been historic. While there are no written records of Patel's visit to NEFA, his vision for the frontiers of the Himalaya has been eminent.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Converging Contemporary Politics and Policies with Patel's Vision

Patel's contribution to India is not limited to the integration of princely states, as his political contribution can also be seen during the time of the freedom struggle. Sahoo et al. (2025) systematically laid out the understanding of Patel's journey from the time of the freedom struggle, when he led one of the major Satyagrahas under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi in 1918. Additionally, the paper Sardar Patel: The Architect of United Bharat further argues the contemporary political development of India and draws a connection with Patel's vision for a unified India in an economic and political context. In an economic sense, the author argues that the policies led by the Modi Government, such as "Make in India" and the "Self-reliant Bharat Campaign," reflect Patel's vision (Sahoo et al. 2025). In a political sense, the author argues that Patel's vision for Jammu and Kashmir has turned into a reality when the abrogation of Article 370 (special/state status to erstwhile Jammu and Kashmir) split J & K into two union territories in 2019 (Sahoo et al. 2025). Hence, Patel's vision for India expands beyond the scope of geographic unity but is inclusive of factors such as understanding contemporary policies, politics, and economics.

2.2. Analysis of Patel's View on Foreign Policy

There is a contrast between the Indian history of pre-independence and contemporary India-China relations, which are marked by uncertainty and instability. The earlier regime of Chiang Kai-Shek in China supported the freedom struggle of India, which deteriorated after Tibet's invasion and India's position in the matter. In this context, Kumar, R. (1991), in his work Life and Work of Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, tries to understand Patel's view on Indian foreign policy. International politics as a relevant area to this study leads to the understanding of the foreign policy of Patel, a critical necessity to underline. The work highlights how Patel had timely warned Jawaharlal Nehru (Prime Minister) about China's intention towards India and the way he identified the issue of securing the Northeastern borders (Kumar, 1991). The research, which is highly critical of Nehru, provides a foundation for understanding the earlier political history of Northeast India and can be navigated to further highlight the dilemma of foreign relations with China that Indian leaders had experienced. Moreover, Patel's view on Burma, China, and Tibet can be linked with contemporary politics concerning Arunachal Pradesh.

2.3. Patel on Individual Liberty

Reddy (2021) highlights Patel being a 'true leader' in resolving conflict between the masses and the government and further regards Patel as a leader standing against exploitation. The chapter Legacy of Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel outlines Patel's view on individual liberty, social integration, and political mobilization (Reddy, 2021). Thus, the study provides an understanding of a critical question to identify the degree of individual freedom and liberty. The paper also includes Patel's work in supporting the masses in need by ensuring dignity through progressive developments (Reddy, 2021); moreover, Patel chaired the advisory committee on Fundamental Rights, Minorities, and Tribal Excluded Areas within the Constituent Assembly, the body that was responsible for drafting India's constitution. Therefore, it provides a scope to study what Patel would entail in understanding and resolving the present-day successionist movement, insurgency, militarization, torture, killing, and the stationed armed army personnel in Northeast India, particularly in Arunachal Pradesh.

2.4. Patel on Cultural Differences

Cultural integration is one of the major discussions in this paper; it is therefore relevant to understand Patel's view on cultural differences. Pratap (2021) provides a framework for understanding how Patel's effort of geographical and political integration led to the rise of Indian nationalism and solidarity among Indians. Patel describing the people of the eastern frontier as not welcoming towards India/Indians and as 'pro-mongoloid' might lead to the understanding that he envisioned cultural assimilation (Mohanty, 2020). However, the chapter Unity, Cultural Diversity, and Nation Building: Sardar Patel's Vision of Modern India argues that Patel supported a balanced act calling for accommodating the needs and aspirations of diverse communities to unite them with the mainstream (Pratap, 2021). Henceforth, the paper provides an understanding that Patel not only aimed for a geographic and political unity but also a cultural unity of the different communities with the mainstream culture in achieving his vision of a united India. In doing so, studying the cultural integration of Arunachal Pradesh through language, settlement, and education can be further analyzed.

2.4. Research Gaps

This paper brings the understanding of Patel's contribution to the eastern frontier that has been largely missing in political and academic discussions. There is a considerable amount of work in understanding Patel's pragmatic approach of shaping India's foreign policy; however, despite the strategic location of Arunachal Pradesh in India-China relations, there is a gap of research concerning foreign policy in the frontiers from a localized perspective. Furthermore, the politics of Arunachal Pradesh are constantly shaped by geopolitical factors, and existing literature on India-China relations does not substantiate the realities of the grassroots communities in the frontier state. Hence, the research aims to study how international politics affects the communities in the frontier state of Arunachal Pradesh.

3. Research Methodology

The paper employs a qualitative and analytical approach to understand Patel's philosophy of political and cultural integration of the eastern frontiers, particularly Arunachal Pradesh, India. Drawing upon historical documents, the study aims to understand the convergence and impact of international politics with the national and grassroots realities, particularly how disputes between countries impact the people in the border regions of Arunachal Pradesh. Additionally, to understand political concepts such as cultural integration, violence, and insurgency, a thorough critical study has been conducted. The study has also made use of primary resources, which include government documents, archival records, government press releases, media reports, and international policy reports by bodies like the United Nations and World Trade Organization. Secondary sources include books, articles, and journals published by academicians on relations studies of Sino-India and scholarly papers on insurgency.

4. Results and Discussions

While the formative governments had political and economic development plans for the entire nation, Arunachal Pradesh was beyond the reach of such developmental policies. The mystical tribes living in the Himalayas and foothills, with their own traditional political system, never felt the need to integrate with the larger political and nationalist identity of Bharat. Patel had identified the cultural distinctiveness of the region to the mainland Indians, and his letter to Jawaharlal Nehru also reveals that Patel was ahead in identifying the cultural and racial similarity of the NEFA population with Mongoloid culture of Tibet and China. He warned that such similarity could be used as a justification by the Chinese government to

claim the region, and the relevance of this revelation can be seen even today, as the basis of China's five-finger policy claiming Arunachal Pradesh as part of Southern Tibet stems from shared culture and identity with Tibet. Patel saw Chinese irredentism and communist imperialism as a threat to India's liberal democracy. He called for guarding the frontiers of NEFA to prevent any materialistic or non-materialistic Chinese penetration in India. Patel had also differentiated between Chinese and Western imperialism and believed that the former was far more dangerous, as it feeds on racial and historical factors (Arpi, 2024). As NEFA was a ground for China to consolidate its imperialist power, Patel foresaw the strategic importance of NEFA to India. Patel's letter also reveals his interest in meeting the Prime Minister to immediately address military preparedness and resolve the threat in the eastern frontier (Arpi, 2024). Hence, Patel's vision for Arunachal Pradesh was not just idealistic in nature but a realist calling for strategic readiness in the eastern borders of India.

Patel's historical understanding of NEFA as to how the region can be vulnerable is evident in the present-day politics of India and China. Today, Arunachal Pradesh is placed in between these great Asian powers, whose politics and stories remain unaddressed. Bath (2021) argues that the claims over Arunachal Pradesh from China and India have placed the politics of the state as a "hostage" to geopolitics. The state today stands as a geopolitically significant region to the country. As it shares international borders, it places the state as a gateway to three countries—Bhutan to the west, China to the north, and Myanmar to the east. Sharing borders with three different countries implies potential for increasing diplomatic ties, border trade, and cross-border cultural exchange. However, other than with Bhutan, there is a lack of outward cordial diplomatic relations with China, particularly due to contemporary military incursions and ongoing territorial disputes, which worsened after the Sino-Indian war of 1962. On the other side of the border, Myanmar's domestic instability and weak borders make Arunachal Pradesh vulnerable to political unrest. Hence, historical conflicts of India with China and present political uncertainty continue to shape the socio-political scenario of Arunachal Pradesh. In 2003, the Indian and Chinese counterparts signed the "Declaration on Principles for Relations and Comprehensive Cooperation between the Republic of India and the People's Republic of China." The declaration incorporated provisions for socio-economic development, peace, and stability, and promoted globalized order, among other objectives. However, the highlight of the declaration was India recognizing the Tibet Autonomous Region as a part of the People's Republic of China (Press Information Bureau, 2003). This recognition formally ended the decade-long issue of Tibet, which affected the relations between India and China. However, contemporary issues such as China renaming multiple places in Arunachal Pradesh as a symbolic aggression and the chief minister of Arunachal Pradesh, Shri Pema Khandu, repeating statements that Arunachal Pradesh shares its borders with Tibet and not China, trigger the already poor, if not worsened, India-China relations. Such statements by government leaders of both countries, despite the joint declaration of 2003, (re)establish the emotional and patriotic stance of India and China towards each other.

4.1. Cultural Integration

The unification of Arunachal Pradesh with Indian nationalism, despite its vast distinctiveness, goes beyond mere geographical and structural placements. It is the emotional integration fostered by the state that binds the tribal culture and its people with mainland India. To understand the integration of hill tribes with the larger nationalist identity, it is crucial to differentiate between cultural integration and cultural assimilation, as the latter can be mistakenly seen as synonymous with the former. Patel, like other early Indian nationalist leaders, advocated for a vibrant democracy that accommodates diverse cultures and groups. In this context, Patel's concept of cultural integration differs from cultural assimilation, where the latter aims to merge the culture of minorities with dominant groups, leading to the loss of their unique identity. Patel, however, aimed at achieving geographical unity while respecting cultural differences within a democratic unified nation. Therefore, Patel's idea of cultural integration sought to establish a sense of 'Indianness' without compromising the tribal culture in the frontiers. This study attempts to understand Patel's concept of cultural integration, which allows two cultures to coexist and progress side by side, while critically analyzing the limitations of cultural integration over the years.

Patel, in his letter to Nehru, mentioned time and again the region's similarity to Mongoloid culture. He noted the limited extent of efforts made by the Indian government in addressing the issues faced by the hill tribes of present-day Northeast. Consequently, the lack of an integrated approach in identifying and solving the socio-political issues of the Northeast led to a lack of trust and isolation between the Government of India (GOI) and the hill tribes of the Northeast. Patel mentioned the hill tribes had not established 'loyalty' or 'devotion' to India and were not free from the prejudices of 'pro-mongoloid'

(Arpi, 2024). What Patel meant by Pro-Mongoloid, although regarded as offensive in present society due to the classification of race, can be relevant at the time when Patel analyzed the socialization of hill tribes in the 1950s. While the term mongoloid was used by Patel in an anthropological manner to classify a group of races, it also reflects a broader socio-political state of Arunachal Pradesh. Patel stated to Nehru that hill tribes were in no way friendly to India/Indians or to visitors who tried to be in touch with them. Therefore, the secluded nature of hill tribes from the larger nationalistic identity was primarily missing. Consequently, post the 1962 Sino-India War, Arunachal Pradesh witnessed a gradual cultural and political shift from a traditionally tribal lifestyle to a modern and patriotic society towards the larger identity of India. In this context, Baruah argues for a political phrase suitable for Arunachal Pradesh— 'nationalizing the frontier space' (Baruah, 2007). It is a deliberate attempt by the state, without resorting to force, to develop a nationalist identity. It is also a calculated step to integrate frontier regions, not necessarily in a geographical sense but in the sense of culture, language, education, or political life in general, to ensure that the frontier tribes remain loyal and patriotic to the nation. And the people of Arunachal Pradesh were targets of this calculated 'nationalizing' agenda.

In this context, to develop a patriotic feeling towards India, the GOI launched Lok Sahayak Sena (1956), a home guard unit of frontier tribes, which involved locals as they received regular military training. This initiative, reflecting an attempt to instill nationalist identity, was well received by the tribes, who were natural experts in patrolling (Bath, 2023). On the lines of culture and education. Several Assamese teachers were replaced by teachers from Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, and Himachal Pradesh. Many stories of nationalist leaders were also incorporated into the textbooks to familiarize students with the independence struggle of India (Bath, 2023). Interestingly, in doing so, the wars fought by hill tribes against the British were largely missing from the textbooks. The young future of NEFA/Arunachal Pradesh was familiarized with wars that happened hundreds of kilometers away, and not with the wars fought by their ancestors. Arguably, a series of wars was fought between the Abor and British India between 1858 and 1911, which has been well documented but is absent when the history of independence is discussed. The tribesmen fought wars with bamboo arrows and stone catapults to protect their hills from any invasion (Intelligence Branch, Government of India, 1907). Hence, the aim of the government to familiarize the hill tribes with the independence struggle of India shadowed the stories of tribal wars of independence against the British. However, in recent years, efforts by tribal groups such as the Adi Baane Kebang Women Wing (ABKWW) are being made to formally recognize the history of the Anglo-Abor War (ABKWW, 2021). It appears that the tribal groups have realized that it is important to differentiate between the independence struggle and tribal resistance against colonial rule and have started to demand the inclusion and recognition of their story of resistance.

Other attempts to nationalize the frontier of NEFA are also evident in studying the resettlement of Assam Rifles in Arunachal Pradesh, which was another geopolitically driven strategic decision made by the GOI. The Ministry of Home highlighted many detailed objectives in the report backing the settlement of personnel in the region. Out of the many objectives, one was the 'emotional integration of NEFA people with the rest of the country'—as the report suggested that a mixed community will foster that feeling (Public Accounts Committee, 1978). Hence, instances of the formative Arunachal's history reflect how Patel was successful in identifying the region's belief in the traditional tribal system, which was far different from the larger nationalistic identity. Today, the government's effort of nationalizing the frontier in the early years following the Sino-India War is evident and is evident in many ways. The school students are familiar with patriotic slogans and songs and are well versed in them, beating the young generations of other neighboring states in patriotic celebration. Additionally, the people in Arunachal Pradesh today can efficiently converse in Hindi, and the Chief Minister of the state calls Hindi the binding language, which is also used in the Assembly for debate (The Hindu, 2020). Due to the influence of Hindi, Bollywood movies and songs are quite popular in the region, and a few tribal artists have also made their way into the Indian entertainment industry. However, the effects of unity through cultural sense and language itself are secondary. True unity, as Patel realized, comes from the inclusivity of the people in the frontiers. Although the primary attempt was to 'nationalize' the tribes and to develop the patriotic emotional sense, which has been largely successful, the objective of the state must be to develop the region in the real sense. Since Hindi as a binding language has been established, it would be near impossible for the Chinese to persuade the region in any cultural or ideological sense, which Patel feared. But unity in a cultural sense is not enough for the tribes in the frontier; cultural unity may be best suited to serve a unified nationalist identity, but unification through investment and infrastructure can serve as a real sense of unity.

4.2. Insurgency in Arunachal Pradesh

Patel placed nationalism and patriotism over regionalism. He believed in individual liberty if it was under the conformity of the Constitution of India. This ideology of Patel is, however, challenged by the militant groups in the Northeast. The Northeastern civilians, including those of Arunachal Pradesh, have endured a long period of insurgency since the 1950s, which stretches even up to this day. While several insurgent groups have made ceasefire agreements with the Government of India, many still operate in the region, causing regional instability. The insurgent groups in the region live on various objectives; while some demand complete secession, others demand autonomy. Regardless, it is exacerbated by various factors of underdevelopment, communalism, and historical disagreements. Patel foresaw the threat that the Chinese foreign policy poses to India, especially with the Chinese invasion of Tibet in 1950. Post China's independence, Mao Zedong's leadership and China's vision for its neighboring countries were shaped by the 'Five Fingers policy.' In other words, it is a foreign policy of China that aims to integrate Ladakh, Nepal, Sikkim, Bhutan, and Arunachal Pradesh (then NEFA) into the political and cultural map of China (Singh, 2012). This foreign policy of China persistently affects the socio-politics of present Arunachal Pradesh, as China persists in ruling out any possibility of indirect influence through armed militants. According to the South Asia Terrorism Portal, Arunachal Pradesh has four active terrorist/insurgent groups. They are the Nationalist Socialist Council of Nagaland- Isak Muivah (IM), the Nationalist Socialist Council of Nagaland- Khaplang (K), the National Liberation Council of Tani Land (NLCT), and the Tani Land National Liberation Tigers (TLNLT). Out of the four listed, the most controversial groups with reports of conflict causing regional unrest and Chinese-backed groups are NSCN-IM and NSCN-K. NSCN was founded in 1980, but due to disagreements between the leaders, NSCN was divided in 1988 into factions. NSCN-IM is led by Isak Chisi Swu and Thuingaleng and NSCN-K is led by S. S. Khaplang (South Asia Terrorism Portal, n.d.). Therefore, in this study, insurgency in Arunachal Pradesh through the political lens of Patel can be studied in two different aspects. Firstly, to understand the nexus of Influence between China and insurgent groups in Arunachal Pradesh, which Patel warned about in 1950. Secondly, to study the provisions and approach of AFSPA through Patel's integration and diplomatic developments.

Patel, in his letter of 'warning India about dangers from China,' highlighted multiple points of infiltration due to a lack of border security. Although his insight was referring to threats from China, his identification of weak borders is also relevant in understanding the insurgency in Arunachal Pradesh through Myanmar, which is backed by China. The limited surveillance of Indo-Myanmar borders due to dense forests makes cross-border movement easy for militants. This has been evident in multiple occasions of social unrest in Arunachal Pradesh, as reports suggest that the militant group of NSCN-K resides in the neighboring country of Myanmar (Haokip, 2018). The rebels of Northeast India have been reported to station their base in the Hukawng Valley of Northern Myanmar. The importance of this Hukawng Valley is such to the militant groups that losing access to the valley will mean a cutoff of the trans-border base area, limited ability to supply weapons, and substantial restraints in training recruits (Bhaumik, 2015). However, insurgents and militants do not just live off an ideology and objective but also materialistic resources to fuel their durability. Intelligence and research have been able to trace the supply of resources distributed to militants in the Northeast. The current geopolitics of South and Southeast Asia show most countries being heavily dependent on China for the import of goods. In 2022, Myanmar's second major import supplier was China, with more than 20%, while India stood at 5.27% (World Bank, n.d.). With heavy dependence on China, criticism and shutdown of arms and weapons supply from China to insurgent groups residing in Myanmar could be waived off at the convenience of the Myanmar government. The Organization for Research on China and Asia (ORCA) also states that arms trafficking and financial aid to militant groups in the Northeast undermine the regional instability of the region (Mehta & Yumlembam, 2025). The alleged links between insurgencies and China further consolidate when statements by insurgent leaders openly claim that the Chinese legally come to India and meet Khaplang (Leader of NSCN-K faction) (New Indian Express, 2010). As Patel pointed out, China's interest in Burma (now Myanmar) turns out to be the physically nearest haven for militants to station their camps, and China has proved to be the source of militants' survival. Moreover, China has a history of backing militants in Northeast India enrooted to Myanmar. There have been several reports of China supplying arms to militants in the Northeast, causing regional disturbance and adding an external indirect conflict to the region. Additionally, issues of training being provided to militants have also been recorded (Pathak, 2021). While such contemporary issues resurface when a conflict in the Northeast occurs, Patel was ahead of his time in identifying China's interest in Burma. He noted that Burma could be an easy target of the Chinese foreign policy due to undefined territories, which then could be used further by the Chinese government to weaken India's security in the far east of the Himalayas.

Due to the presence of active insurgency, the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA), promulgated in 1958, has been imposed in the three districts of Arunachal Pradesh- Tirap, Changlang and Longding. Therefore, another aspect of studying insurgency in the frontiers of the Himalaya through Patel's approach is to analyses the effects of AFSPA and revisit Patel's efforts in integrating diverse regions to navigate a contemporary approach. AFSPA was imposed in 1991 in Arunachal Pradesh; it empowers the armed forces to conduct warrantless searches and shoot and kill any suspects. The Act has been subjected to criticism by various groups and individuals due to its extreme measures, which undermine the Fundamental Rights of the Indian Constitution. In this context, Patel was an ardent supporter of an inclusive country where people of all faiths and cultures can thrive in a democratic republic. His disagreement with communism is evident in his critique of Communist ideology (Mohanty, 2022). Hence, it can be inferred that Patel was not in favor of an authoritative state but rather a democratic one. Additionally, Sardar Patel was the chairman of the Advisory Committee on Fundamental Rights and Tribals and Excluded Areas within the constituent assembly. Therefore, it is an interesting insight to analyses what approach Patel would entail in navigating contemporary challenges of the clash between the rights of the Citizens and AFSPA. The failure of the State in meeting the aspirations of minorities in a country leads to secessionist tendencies, which then places laws such as AFSPA (Wani, 2022). Insurgency in the Northeast does not remain the same forever, as the complex power dynamics continuously shift as per socio-political factors. While many militant groups have ceased to exist, some still operate either as an offshoot of a debunked group or a new one emerges. The split of NSCN is an example that power shifts and conflicts are (re)produced. However, the provisions of AFSPA remain the same and act as an intermediate between democracy and absolutism (Wani, 2022).

The United Nations Human Rights Council states that the Indian government, under the cloak of AFSPA, violates morally based human rights and individual freedom. The UN had also highlighted forced disappearances, fake encounters with criminals, and extrajudicial killings. Consequently, the UNHRC urged the GOI to repeal AFSPA and protect the civilians of the Northeast (Indigenous People of Africa Coordinating Committee, 2024). AFSPA militarizes the day-to-day lives of citizens and increases state surveillance in the region. There have been countless instances of violence and rape committed against women by army personnel. However, under the sanction of AFSPA, the rule of law itself is compromised because the accountability for rape and abuse is nonexistent, and the ground reality subverts any possibility for judicial redress (Wani, 2022). Hence, the central question arises in analyzing AFSPA through Patel's philosophy. In his efforts to integrate princely states in India, he used dialogue and diplomacy. Patel's way of establishing trust and communication made the task of integration possible. However, the lesser-known fact is that force was not ruled out by Patel in circumstances when India's unity was challenged. Therefore, AFSPA, as an act of countering secessionist militants, is justifiable from the point of Patel's integral ideology. But the ground reality involving torture, rape, and fake encounters would not have been advocated by Patel. Although Patel did not entirely rule out force, he also did not sanction it unless India's integrity was challenged. Therefore, a common ground between national security and the protection of civilians in insurgency-prone areas must be drawn. Post-independence, the region witnessed an alarming number of insurgent groups in the Northeast; however, many groups are no longer in operation following peace accords and agreements signed between the militants and the GOI. The Bodo Accord, Bru-Reang Agreement, National Liberation Front of Tripura, and Karbi Anglong Agreement, among many others, are prime examples of possible triumphs of diplomacy (Press Information Bureau, 2022). Hence, peace cannot be enforced but must be navigated. To counter insurgency in Arunachal Pradesh, or rather the entire Northeast, Patel's approach of balancing force with dialogue is essential.

5. Frontier Framework

5.1. Meaningful Integration

The 'nationalization' of hill tribes within the larger nationalist identity has, in some ways, undermined the distinct socio-cultural lives of these tribes in the frontiers. While political unity is necessary for a country, diversified representation is equally important for nation-building. Therefore, meaningful integration through political representation at the central government level is essential, as it provides a space in the decision-making process where the voices of minorities can be heard. Moreover, the visibility of tribes and their unique cultures in the media and social spaces across the rest of India should be prioritized, as cultural exchanges foster broader minds and a more tolerant society.

5.2. Inclusive Development

The development of frontiers should not be solely focused on security and defense, but should also encompass holistic development that includes acceptance and tolerance. Moreover, the state must aim at ensuring that the necessities for a sustainable life are met, rather than merely focusing on developing patriotism and nationalism. The hill state of Arunachal Pradesh has long suffered from a lack of infrastructural development, impacting daily life, health, education, and overall well-being. Establishing primary institutions that facilitate a quality life can significantly reduce the enrollment of young minds into insurgency groups. Therefore, Patel's approach to developing frontiers for security reasons can also be extended to civilian development, fostering true integration among tribes whose political concerns have been marginalized.

5.3. Border Resolution

The contentious international politics between India and China adversely impact the communities living in the disputed region. Their daily lives are shaped by stationed forces, surveillance, and uncertainty. It is time for both powers to approach their relations with the objective of resolution. Engaging in diplomatic talks while prioritizing the greater and safer interests of the border civilians is essential. Both countries must realize that the mighty power they seek will be contested if the marginalized communities they claim as their own continue to live in despair. Territorial claims are mostly shaped by historical narratives of culture, kinship and the political sphere. Therefore, institutionalizing a joint discussion to clarify perceptions and historical narratives can be adopted in resolving the issues that have persisted for many years.

5.4. Dialogue and Diplomacy

Patel advocated the approach of dialogue and diplomacy over the use of force, resorting to the latter only when the status of India's unity was questioned. Similarly, political unrest in the state, driven by separatist tendency can only be resolved by diplomacy and communication. The use of force leads to violence and provokes the opposing party to retaliate. By adopting Patel's approach of dialogue, agreements can be reached, and the state must strive to accommodate demands with the greater good of the innocent civilians in mind. Furthermore, the authority granted to the Armed Forces under AFSPA to shoot or kill should be revoked, as it causes more harm than good. Given that Patel chaired the committee on Minority Rights and Fundamental Rights, it is likely that he would include provisions to protect the minority hill tribes and their right to life.

6. Conclusion

Arunachal Pradesh might be a geographically small state, but it has issues trying to navigate through mainstream politics. But the state has a rich history of indigenous and nationalist politics converging with international geopolitics. While the historical British India and the formative years of Indian politics ignored the eastern frontiers of the Himalayas, Patel, as a government minister, contrasted and believed in merging the region in a true sense by initiating an integral and inclusive developmental approach. Today, there is a considerable degree of external pressure in the state politics of Arunachal Pradesh as China's military incursion and persistent claims over Arunachal Pradesh continue. Therefore, the borders of the frontiers must be strengthened, which Patel identified even before Arunachal Pradesh became a state. Moreover, as Arunachal Pradesh struggles with a decade-long armed militant, it is for the state to diplomatically negotiate with any secessionist movement. It is in this essence that Patel's historical leadership and his approach must be revisited. While any separatist movement is a threat to the country's unity, that alone does not justify the atrocities inflicted on innocent lives under the cloak of national security. Identifying the ambiguities of AFSPA, causing civil unrest, must be prioritized. Additionally, while attempts at cultural integration through language have been made, integration through developmental policies is yet to be realized in the region. Moreover, the developmental policies brought in by the state must not be backed solely by the 'China factor,' but the frontiers for the people of Arunachal Pradesh must be developed in the true sense.

6.1. Limitations

The study primarily focuses on Patel's vision for NEFA (Arunachal Pradesh) and not the entirety of Northeast India, which limits the scope of understanding the integration of the tribal regions in Northeast India. Additionally, the research does not incorporate ethnographic study, questionnaires, or interviews, thereby limiting the understanding that could have been gained from the lived experiences of communities in the affected region. Despite the limitations in this study, it provides a foundation for future research to explore relevant inference.

6.2. Future Research

The area of this study can be extended to understand the relevance and contribution of Indian political thinkers and leaders in the tribal areas of Northeast India. Additionally, viewing from a post-colonial study, research can be conducted on colonial Acts and laws that are still in place on the hill tribes of the Northeast. Moreover, through quantitative methods, case study and empirical-based research studies can also be conducted to highlight the impact of AFSPA, insurgency, militancy and violence in Arunachal Pradesh. Similarly, other scope such as understanding international geopolitics from a borderland community, can also be taken into consideration.

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Conflict of Interest

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